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Reagan's new sweetheart

CLAUDIA WRIGHT investigates
the North African connection

RABAT: An important new liaison is flourishing between the United States and Morocco. The Americans are prepared to supply King Hassan with weapons to enable him to escalate the fighting in the Western Sahara against the Polisario. In return, the CIA is stepping up its strength in Rabat, as a useful base for covert operations in the Maghreb and Western Africa.

During 1981, the Reagan administration sent a very unusual number of high-level officials to Morocco. General Vernon Walters, Deputy Director of the CIA between 1972 and 1976 and now a roving ambassador for the State Department, visited Rabat in March and again in October and December. Lannon Walker, then acting Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, was there at the same time in March. Francis West, Assistant Secretary of Defense in charge of international security and military sales, made two visits, one of them in November at the head of a delegation of 23 military advisers and experts. Frank Carlucci, Deputy Secretary of Defense, arrived in midsummer. Vice Admiral Bobby Inman, the current deputy director of the CIA, made a secret visit to Rabat not long after. In December the Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, met with the King in Fez. And he was followed, on 19 December, by Senator Charles Percy, Republican Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Presenting his credentials to King Hassan in November, the new US Ambassador Joseph Verner Reed Jr., a Chase Manhattan Bank official and long-time friend of the King's, declared: 'The United States will do its best to be helpful in every area of need that may arise. Count on us.'

This represents a significant shift in US policy since President Carter's days. As Morris Draper, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, testified before a Congressional committee last March, Carter's policy had been 'neutral as regards the final status of the West Saharan territory', taking the view that 'a military solution to this conflict is neither possible nor desirable'.

Morocco has enjoyed unusual access in Washington since Reagan's election. Two key officials in the Reagan team — General Walters and Robert Neumann (a former ambassador to Morocco and director of the State Department in the transition period which followed the election) — were associated with DGA International, a Washington firm that had lobbied the Carter administration and Congress to supply Morocco with 108 M-60 tanks, together with other weaponry and surveillance equipment suited for Saharan conditions. Carter would only go so far as to supply 20 F-5 fighter aircraft and six OV-10 surveillance planes. But within days of taking over in January 1981, General Haig announced that the tank sale would go ahead. Initially, this was on condition that the tanks would not be used in the Sahara. However, Moroccan officials say they will accept no restrictions on their deployment and the Americans have now stopped insisting

Two developments have facilitated the change in US policy. One was King Hassan's announcement to the OAU summit in Nairobi that he would accept a referendum on Moroccan sovereignty in the contested Saharan territory. His offer ruled out direct talks with the Polisario and the terms of the referendum are unlikely to satisfy them; however, the gesture was good enough for the Reagan team — who have applauded it publicly as a legitimate means of settling the dispute, and welcomed it privately as a device for confirming Hassan's military occupation of the old Spanish territory.

The second development was the Polisario's October victory at the battle of Guelta Zemmour. In a surprise attack, the Polisario destroyed the 2,000-strong Moroccan garrison in the town, captured a great deal of equipment and downed five Moroccan planes. Hassan's army was forced to retreat northwards behind the wall of sand, ditches, barbed wire and minefields that has been under construction for just over a year. (The wall encloses the phosphate-rich centres of the Western Sahara that make the sand worth fighting over.) The United States and Morocco have since claimed that SAM-6 missiles and Soviet-built T54 and T55 tanks were used against Morocco in the battle. King Hassan has alleged that 'Non-African specialists' were fighting alongside the Polisario. Libya and the Soviet Union have been blamed for supplying the missiles and tanks.

The Libyans deny supplying the Polisario with the SAM-6, and the French in Morocco confirm that the aircraft at Guelta Zemmour could have been brought down by less sophisticated weapons. The Soviet tanks that may have appeared at the battle were almost certainly captured two years ago from the Moroccan army itself: they originally came from Egypt. Wafer-thin though the allegations may be, they provide public justification for the American decision to step up the supply of arms to Morocco.

According to American officials, the delivery of M60 tanks, initially scheduled for 1984, is to be accelerated and new equipment for defence against ground-fired missiles and night fighting are also to be shipped soon. Assistant Secretary West promised in early November to consider despatching radar-detection and jamming equipment for the Moroccan airforce. And a month ago, he offered a substantial increase in military advisers to train pilots and troops for the war. At least a dozen US military advisers have already been spotted wearing Moroccan uniform in Smara and Al Auin in the war zone. Polisario officials in Algiers say they are operating ground-to-air communications and radar, installed by the Americans.

Representatives of the Reagan administration in Morocco recently expressed confidence to me that the war would be won. They have certainly dropped any pretence of neutrality. As far as the Reagan administration is concerned, the Polisario 'don't exist' — they are just mercenaries, Mauritians and Algerians. The war itself is seen simply as an extension of Libyan ambitions to destabilise American allies in the region.

The CIA is thought to be increasing the size of its station in Morocco to compensate for its losses elsewhere. In 1979 it lost its Libyan post after the embassy withdrew and in July 1981 Norman Descouteaux, CIA chief in Algiers, was exposed by the Algerian authorities and expelled. *Covert Action Information Bulletin* in Washington has identified three senior agents in Morocco. The latest, Joseph Pettinelli, arrived last February. David Wilson and Arthur Nimer Jr were spotted in Casablanca and Rabat two years ago; both are known to have had prior experience of Qaddafi's Libya.

There is little doubt that the increased CIA activity in Morocco is aimed at Qaddafi, the other major target being Angola. In Morocco last March Jonas Savimbi of Unita had talks with General Walters, Lannon Walker and two CIA men from Rabat. The new arms flow to Morocco for the Sahara enables the Reagan Administration to evade Congressional prohibitions still in force against covert aid to Unita. Arms intended for Savimbi are to be passed to Morocco legally and transferred while Washington looks the other way. As long as the White House can convince doubters in Congress that 'Soviet surrogates' such as the Libyans are behind the Polisario, the Saharan conflict will remain a useful front for covert operations of this kind. □